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COLUMN: Marblehead Harbor Plan nearly complete

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Marblehead’s greatest asset is its harbor, a source of employment, nourishment and enjoyment for the community and an economic driver that has served us well for four centuries. There is no town of Marblehead without Marblehead Harbor. Ensuring its future requires careful planning and execution.

The most comprehensive harbor plan in the past 14 years will be completed this spring, when we hope to begin the transition to the next phase — implementation. It’s an investment in the harbor’s future ability to be a primary source of economic and recreational opportunities for the benefit of all.



In 2021, the town received a grant from the Massachusetts Seaport Economic Council to update the existing 2009 Harbor Plan — including the Marblehead side of Salem Harbor. The objective was to identify community goals and recommendations for public and private use of the land and water of harbor areas and establish an implementation program to achieve desired outcomes. The focus was to identify and prioritize infrastructure needs for assets owned by the town.

An experienced harbor consultant and engineering firm were hired to assist with the planning process. The Select Board appointed a Harbor Plan Working Group consisting of various citizen groups and town staff to assist the consultant and engineer.

A parallel planning process, led by the town and assisted by Salem Sound Coastwatch and Woods Hole Group and funded through Coastal Zone Management, is focused on resiliency to sea-level rise and climate change. The town should combine the recommendations of the Harbor Plan with that of the coastal resiliency process to develop a complete picture of priorities for the harbor.

To date, some six Harbor Working Group meetings, including three public workshops, have been held, along with an online public survey. A vision of the harbor has been written, an inventory of harbor assets completed, existing conditions documented, policies and goals identified, costs of key improvements estimated and an implementation strategy outlined.

An initial draft of the Harbor Plan is under review at present by the Harbor Working Group. Once completed, the plan will be made available for public review and comment in March.



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The most comprehensive harbor plan in the past 14 years will be completed this spring, and those who have been working on the plan hope implementation will begin soon thereafter. COURTESY PHOTO / BRUCE DURKEE

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We can share, however, the likely findings and recommendations in three key areas that will be in the final report: Infrastructure, access to the water and land-side uses. Within these areas are five key goals.

The first goal is to repair and maintain existing infrastructure, which includes rehabilitating seawalls and piers at more than 20 locations such as State Street Landing, Parker’s Boatyard and Front Street. All of the requisite infrastructure projects — multiple repairs and rehabilitation projects throughout the harbor — carry an estimated cost in 2022 dollars of \$6.5 million (exclusive of additional costs of preparing the infrastructure to address sea level rise).

It’s expected that the town will take advantage of various grants that are available to help fund this work — including design studies, construction drawings and actual construction.

If protecting what we have and ensuring its future is our single most important goal, the second goal is an equally high priority and closely connected: supporting public access to the water, which includes creating or improving public access points and ADA compliance at multiple locations such as at Village Street, Stramski’s and Gas House Beach.

A major focus of this goal is to plan and implement a more effective use of Parker’s Boatyard (community boating center, electric boat charging stations, boat launch facilities). It also includes adding a second trawl line for Town Class and other small boats.

The third goal is to support water-dependent and water-focused economic development. The harbor has been at the center of the town’s economy for centuries, and we must ensure that economic value continues.

This includes a major facelift for State Street Landing (piers, parking, paving), Commercial Street Landing to support commercial fishing (new gangway, floating dock, conveyor belt system) and potentially dredging parts of Little Harbor.

The fourth goal is addressing public safety on the water, working with Salem on a joint public education campaign about water quality and steps to improve the ecological health of Marblehead and Salem harbors. This includes creating public education campaigns around boating safety for all craft.



The fifth goal is to develop policies and identify investments to address expected long-term sea-level rise in those areas identified by scientists that will be affected in 2030 and beyond, including the Cliff Street Boatyard and Commercial Street Landing. This goal also includes revisiting the feasibility of a breakwater or wave-attenuation strategies in the harbor.

The plan also calls for supporting entrepreneurs with water-based businesses, including the commercial fishing community, core of our blue economy. In 2018, 83 boats landed catch (lobsters, striped bass, cod) valued at \$3.28 million.

Together, we can leverage government funding and grants to help implement plans that will protect, enhance and make sustainable our greatest resource for future generations. Marblehead Harbor deserves nothing less.

Rob Howie is a member of the Marblehead Harbor Plan Working Group, Sailors for the Sea Skipper for Marblehead and a board member of Sustainable Marblehead.



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